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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 001074

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARP AND OES
STATE PASS EPA
AMMAN FOR ENVIRONMENT HUB

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [SENV](#) [EPET](#) [ALOW](#) [IZ](#) [KU](#)

SUBJECT: TFI201: THE WORD ON KUWAIT'S ENVIRONMENT

REF: A. KUWAIT 00920

[B](#). KUWAIT 01021

[C](#). KUWAIT 1064 (NOTAL)

[1](#)1. SUMMARY: As US-led military action against Iraq moved into its sixth day, Kuwait stepped up measures to protect the environment from Iraqi retaliatory strikes. Particular focus has been placed on monitoring the air and sea, as dark clouds from Iraqi oil fires continue to drift across the border into Kuwait. In recent days the GOK launched a public relations campaign to assure its populace -- both remaining in Kuwait and temporarily outside the country -- that environmental conditions remain safe, despite troubling images seen in newspapers and on TV.

DARK SKIES

[1](#)2. On March 22, the GOK's Emergency Response Committee (ref A) held one of its regular meetings to discuss damage caused by oil fires burning in Iraq and other potential threats to Kuwait's environment. The Committee draws together officials from several departments tasked with protecting the environment in the face of Iraqi aggression. Environmental Public Authority (EPA) Chairman Dr. Mohammad Sarawi, who oversees the Committee, announced that the GOK was planning to open a mobile laboratory near its northern border to monitor the atmosphere for pollutants, in addition to the six fixed stations already operating throughout the country.

[1](#)3. Dr. Sarawi told Econoff March 23 that he had been tracking with some concern the advance of large, black clouds entering Kuwait from Iraq. Local press described the sky in Jahra, 12 miles north of Kuwait City, as being "very black and close to the ground, causing poor visibility." Sarawi stressed that the clouds caused by Iraq setting fire to its own oil wells still did not pose any health hazards in Kuwait (ref B).

[1](#)4. Dr. Sarawi was hopeful that wind gusts expected later this week would drive out any pollutants, but acknowledged the threat of longer term effects to Kuwait's environment. He said that a team of experts from Houston (Boots and Coots International Well Control), contracted by the USG to fight oil fires in southern Iraq, predicted it might take as long as 35-40 days to fully bring burning oil fields under control. (See ref C for more information on fire fighting activities.)

CLEAN WATER

[1](#)5. Captain Ali Haider, Director of EPA's Marine Pollution Monitoring Department, told Econoff that his staff had not registered any oil spills in the Gulf. Prior to the outbreak of fighting, the GOK had feared that Iraq might use oil as a weapon by dumping it into Kuwaiti waters. Haider explained that any spill in the Gulf could take three to four days to reach the Sabiya station (just south of Bubiyan Island), where his staff was located, yet he was fairly confident there would be no spills now that coalition forces were securing Iraq's main ports.

[1](#)6. Haider was concerned, however, that oil particles from the Iraqi fires would stick to the sand and dust present in the Kuwaiti air following recent sand storms. Weighted down from the oil, this debris might then drop into the Gulf, creating a situation similar to a limited oil slick. Haider said his team was taking readings from the water to determine what clean-up procedures might need to be taken. Divers were also investigating potential damage caused when an Iraqi missile struck the water near Kuwait's Shuaiba Port.

[1](#)7. Dr. Sarawi added that Kuwait's drinking water remained safe and free of pollutants. Daily laboratory tests taken from ten locations revealed that the drinking water continued to meet international standards established by the World Health Organization, he said.

GETTING THE WORD OUT

[1](#)8. The Emergency Response Committee has begun a community outreach campaign to allay any fears people might have about

environmental conditions. As a counter to newspaper photos and TV images of Kuwait's darkened skies, Dr. Sarawi has conducted interviews with several major media outlets. CNN has run on its "ticker tape" statements he made, while Kuwait's Arabic- and English-language newspapers have printed articles featuring Dr. Sarawi and other environmental experts.

19. Last week, Kuwait's EPA established an Internet website that enables concerned citizens to follow the air quality in six locations throughout the country. The site (www.epa.org.kw) provides contact information and hourly reports on pollution levels for a variety of chemicals in the air. It is rather simplistic, however, and somewhat confusing, as there is no explanation for viewers on the type or severity of pollutants listed. (Note: Post suggested to the EPA that it consider expanding the site and making it more user-friendly. End Note.)

COMMENT

110. Kuwaitis remember well the horrors of the environmental damage left by retreating Iraqi forces in 1991, including the burning of more than 700 oil wells that blackened the skies for seven months -- hence the front page attention given to Dr. Sarawi's statements. Despite that disaster, Kuwaitis still do not have a great sense of responsibility for their environment, and we remain skeptical that the current crisis will change their attitudes. Nonetheless, we might be able to use the present attention focused on the environment, coupled with the positive relationship being forged through USG-GOK cooperation on this issue, as a springboard toward encouraging vital environmental reforms in Kuwait once the conflict is over.

JONES